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Harvey's toxic aftermath was preventable

BY LUKE METZGER AND KARA COOK-SCHULTZ, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS - 09/05/17 03:20 PM EDT

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While our hearts ache for all that the people of Texas have lost in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, this tragedy is compounded by shortsighted decisions that have exposed Texans to unnecessary health and environmental dangers.

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It may take years before we learn all of the lessons that will help us avoid more mistakes like these in the future. But some lessons are clear right now. First, let's take a look at the problems.

Many petrochemical facilities in the path of the storm and floodwaters — already encumbered with outdated equipment and personnel insufficiently trained on environmental compliance — waited until the last minute to shut down. In the process, they released more than 2 million pounds of toxic emissions into the air and water, according to an [analysis by Environment Texas](#). These chemicals include carcinogens like benzene and respiratory irritants like sulfur dioxide.

Floodwaters then overran at least [13 sites that are so toxic they're listed as federal priority Superfund sites](#), spreading more contamination. That includes places like the San Jacinto Waste Pits, where more than [600 fishermen, landowners and others are suing the company responsible over alleged cancers and other health problems resulting from a life of eating seafood contaminated by the site](#). Now, flooding of the site risks further release of these toxins in to the environment.

Floodwaters also overwhelmed facilities that manufacture highly volatile chemicals. There are as many as 500 industrial chemical sites in the Houston area, many of which endanger millions of people in a worst case scenario, as [documented by Texas Public Interest Research Group](#). One of these facilities, the [Arkema chemical plant in Crosby, Texas, has experienced a series of explosions](#) and thousands of people have been evacuated.

Meanwhile, our first responders have been hampered as they address these problems because the facilities share little information about the chemicals and other hazardous substances they produce, store or process. It's hard enough to fight a fire at an industrial facility. When you don't know what you're dealing with, the risks grow exponentially, both to first responders and the surrounding community.

These problems could have been mitigated, if not averted, by better decision-making.

The state of Texas largely gives a free pass to polluters when they break the law. For example, according to a [July report by Environment Texas and the Environmental Integrity Project](#), between 2011 and 2016, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality fined only 3 per cent of illegal air emissions resulting from malfunctions or maintenance at petrochemical facilities.

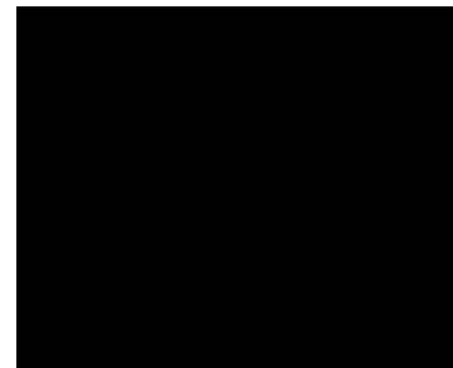
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With a track record like that, it's no wonder companies aren't investing in modernization at their facilities with better pollution controls.

In 2014, Gov. Greg Abbott, when he was Attorney General, rolled back a right to know rule that would make it easier for the public and first responders to know what they're dealing with now. Instead Abbott advised Texans to "drive around" to ask these facilities what they're storing, rather than requesting the information from the state. There's nothing stopping any of these companies from volunteering to share more information with the public, but even after explosions at their chemical plant, Arkema refused to release the storage locations and safety protocols for their inventory.

As recently as June, EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt delayed Obama-era safety rules that would have at least nudged companies into improving safety practices and sharing more information.

Given advances in technology and greater awareness of climate change and other threats to our environment, we should be using less oil and fewer toxic chemicals in the first place. To the degree that we're still producing and refining petrochemicals, all steps necessary should be taken to keep them and their byproducts out of our air, soil and water. Strong protections should be enacted and enforced to keep workers, first responders and community residents informed and safe from accidents, spills and explosions.

Texas families are now paying the price for decisions that ignored these principles. If we act now, we can spare those who are in the path of the next natural disaster from suffering similar consequences — and improve the health and safety of our workplaces and communities in the process.

Luke Metzger is the director of Environment Texas, a non-profit advocate for clean air, clean water and open spaces.

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The views expressed by contributors are their own and are not the views of The Hill.

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